

SUSTAINABLE POST - CRISIS FOOD SYSTEMS

(Lessons learned from the Portuguese Experience)

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Abstract --The central argument of the present paper is that Urban Agriculture in Portugal is a growing field that has been largely expanding as a result of the effects of the 2008 socio-economic crisis. In addition to a fair number of allotments promoted by some municipalities and institutions, a significant number of short food chains initiatives that share in common the values of the social and solidarity economy are consolidating in a post-crisis scenario, despite the lack of a most needed facilitating public policy. Such initiatives are paving the way to shift from Urban Agriculture as an answer to the effects of the crisis, in the European peripheries, towards a full fledged post-crisis emergent sector.

In summary those innovative initiatives can contribute to establish positive bridges to re-research and exchange on how public policies could contribute to building better food systems in Europe.

Keywords – Urban Agriculture; Crisis; Short Food Chains; Portugal; Urban Agriculture in Europe
Preferred session: Rethinking sustainable food systems

INTRODUCTION TO USING THE TEMPLATE

This short paper is part of a larger research and development project on the State of the Art of Urban Agriculture [UA] in Portugal that began at the end of 2014. The process involved so far a scoping study on urban agriculture and the refinement of research questions; design of research instruments; identification and selection of empirical cases; case study visits; interviews of relevant actors and key informants; data processing and analysis; dissemination of results in scientific journals; and feedback to engage actors locally, nationally and internationally.

Since the integration of Portugal in the European Union in 1986, UA was neither part of key issues in debates nor a supported sector. It is only since the early 2000's that local food systems and UA in Portugal started to take benefit of European Programs.

In addition, European Research Programs as Cost Urban Allotments Garden in European Cities [2012-2016] and Cost Urban Agriculture Europe [2012-2016] that integrated Portuguese teams and practices (Bell et al., 2016, Lohrberg et al., 2016), played a significant role in connecting Portuguese UA practices and debates with those taking place in other European countries.

There is therefore a tremendous need and a unique opportunity to deepen these debates. This also means to understand carefully the specificities

and trends of UA in Portugal, as well as converging and diverging points with what is happening elsewhere in Europe. This being said, the focus of the present communication is to understand what can be learned from the UA Portuguese experiences emerging in the post-crisis scenario, and its relevance to food systems in Europe? In doing so, one could highlight policies that would be tailored to specificities of UA in the country and at the same time identify if some of the practices and approaches that are being implemented can contribute to the development of European UA and more widely to sustainable food systems in European cities and regions post-crisis.

METHODS

In order to better define UA, it was decided to get the perception of 12 key relevant informants with national recognition. A semi-structured interview covering several UA dimensions was applied. In addition, they were asked to indicate those projects, programs and practices that according to them were the most illustrative of UA in Portugal. The list ended up in 29 projects and programs.

Additionally a variety of methods and tools was used to gather and validate non systematic data: [a] systematic and repeated web site visits were made; [b] site-visits; [c] in-depth interviews of prime informants and practitioners and farmers involved; [d] occasional exchange with producers, consumers, supporters and partners; [e] networking activities and participation in seminars on urban agriculture related events in order to get better insights into practices.

RESULTS

The multidimensional method applied leads to conclude that UA in Portugal: [1] embraces allotment gardens, specific programs and projects, productive farms and short food chains enterprises; [2] deals essentially with unprocessed vegetables and fruit; [3] takes place dominantly on either public or institutional lands and; [4] is spearheaded by municipalities but to a lesser extent by civil society initiatives; [5] from a spatial point of view, is dominantly a metropolitan phenomenon i.e. Lisbon and Porto.

When we observe UA practices through time three periods can be identified: [1] slow emergence of experiences before the peak of the 2008 socio-economic crisis as the first one as formalized in 2003; [2] post-crisis swift expansion of experiments and programs; [3] slight decrease of number of experiences and possible stabilization after 2015. In conclusion, that UA expanded swiftly since 2008 economic crisis and the slight decrease after 2015 raises a theoretical and practical issue on how to

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shift from an answer to a crisis-driven urban agriculture to a permanent post-crisis sustainable food systems approach.

In order to illustrate the post-crisis UA Portuguese scenario, the research explores further three innovative practices of short food supply chains (Moustier and Renting, 2015) identified as an emerging category of UA Typology in Portugal. They represent paradigmatic cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of short food chains, targeting urban consumers primarily from Lisbon and Porto Metropolitan Areas.

Table 1 highlights *Fruta Feia*, *Biovivos* and *Cabaz do Peixe* main dimensions. All the initiatives are emerging in the post-crisis scenario. Interestingly, *Fruta Feia* and *Biovivos* give continuity to mainstream products, vegetables or fruits in Portuguese UA. All are distributing raw products. They have generated jobs, in a country badly hit by the crisis.

Table 1. Basic comparative data on four Portuguese short circuits' initiatives*

	<i>Fruta Feia</i>	<i>Biovivos</i>	<i>Cabaz Peixe</i>
Starting date	2013	2014	2015
Products	Fruits and vegetables	Microgreens	Fish
Production location	Peri-urban	Urban	Peri-urban
Distribution location	Urban	Urban	Urban
Number of consumers	2500	20 + 50	+ 300
Distributions points	7	16	7
Sales per week	2100 baskets	800 pots	100 baskets
Distance production to distribution	Up to 80 km	Up to 20 km	Up to 50 km
Jobs created	8 + producers	2	2

* Data updated in January 2017

DISCUSSION AND PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

Practices of UA-based short food chains described here cannot be isolated from a new culture of social enterprises emerging in Portugal. This is probably a distinctive feature that links up all three experiences. Not surprisingly, all of them are emerging under the impulse of young social entrepreneurs with high academic skills and their activities are strongly relying on social networks.

All together they point out that short food chains initiatives in the post-crisis scenario of Portuguese UA, with strong social economy and environmental perspective, have the ability to grow in periods of crisis recovery.

In addition, these practices have particular relevance as they illustrate that Portuguese post-crisis food systems have shifted from production to distribution. Therefore we argue that Portuguese emerging approaches are of relevance to other European cities as they show a ground-breaking shift from a crisis approach based on food production for self-consumption, to food within a social and environmental perspective generating economic added value. Why is this important? It shows clearly that

social innovation in UA not only can be economically viable, but also can contribute to youth job creation, as Mougeot (2015) pointed out, a major issue in European countries.

In spite of this, the limit today is that the experiences are still very raw, rooted in unprocessed food products as vegetables and fruits and do not consider the complete food chain. In consequence, transformation of what is being produced as food and non-food products, e.g. compost, is still extremely weak. For that reason, there is a need to re-frame the system, in order to build a comprehensible food planning system that considers the wide-ranging potential of urban-rural food chains, on a national level.

In summary, UA-based short food chains can be a driving force to move from UA as an adaptive measure to crisis, to further post-crisis sustainable solutions along with the much-needed support of public policies. In the meantime, the current Portuguese challenge is to avoid the historical scenario i.e. Portugal as a provider of raw unprocessed products, and, in this case organic food, for the sole benefit of Northern Europe and transnational countries.

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